Spin City

Modern DJs Look to 1970s Jazz for Beats and Inspiration

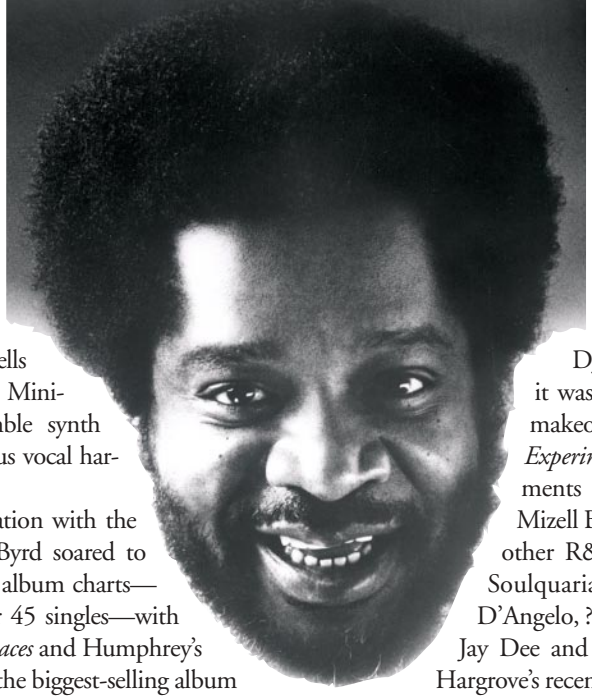
Once dismissed as commercial trash and sell-out music, the jazz-funk of the 1970s has made its way back to respectability as a whole generation of electronica artists have taken to the beats, timbres and harmonies of the era. These modern-day artists—such as Madlib, Charlie Dark, Kirk Degiorgio and more—use samples based on jazz-funk drums breaks and mix them with ARP solos inspired by Herbie Hancock and deep bass lines that evoke the Mizell Brothers—all steeped in that sort of spacey production that recalls the work of Dave Rubinson.

Let's get back to the future.

Between 1972 and 1976, trumpeter Donald Byrd and flutist Bobbi Humphrey ruled the jazz-funk scene. Byrd and Humphrey were Blue Note's most commercially viable artists at that time, fashioning LPs that leaned so heavily toward R&B and funk that they could not be called jazz-fusion in the sense of Return to Forever or Weather Report. Where those bands usually favored lofty themes, pyrotechnical improvisations and cerebral collective interplay, the music of Byrd and Humphrey put the roots down and climbed that funky tree to the tippy top.

The men responsible for much of the sound that Byrd and Humphrey drove up the charts was produced by a couple of guys named Larry and Fonce—aka the Mizell Brothers.

BY JOHN MURPH ILLUSTRATION BY TOM DEJA



DONALD BYRD

The Mizell Brothers' ruggedly produced albums were geared toward the dance floor and basement parties. Their sound featured scratching wah-wah guitars over an funky rhythmic bed of backbeats, splattering percussion and groovy bass lines. The Mizells then added atmospheric layers of Mini-Moog, clavinet and ARP Ensemble synth strings and haunting ghetto-fabulous vocal harmonies.

With each succeeding collaboration with the Mizell Brothers, Humphrey and Byrd soared to the top of the jazz, R&B and pop album charts—sometimes even delivering popular 45 singles—with records such as Byrd's *Places and Spaces* and Humphrey's *Black and Blue*. In 1972, Byrd had the biggest-selling album in Blue Note history at the time with *Black Byrd*. But as the success of musicians like Byrd increased, so did the number of haters from the jazz world.

In 1973 Byrd lash back to the harsh criticism of his new musical direction in a *Down Beat* feature, written by Herb Nolan: "I've been playing too goddamned long to have any problems with that shit," referring to the backlash. "I write music the way I feel at the time, whatever my interests may be, that's the direction I go."

But Byrd's argument didn't persuade most mainstream jazz fans or critics. In a 1974 *Down Beat* review of Byrd's *Street Lady*, Neil Tesser wrote, "[He] isn't making these albums because he can't do anything better; it's a matter of choice. The repetitive rhythms, hackneyed harmonies and unoriginal melodies are musically vapid, and yet Byrd has that Mizell Touch that turns everything, if not to gold, then at least to substantial sales and positions on the charts."

Byrd was simply a sellout in the eyes of jazz pundits, and with the 1980s neobop Renaissance the trumpeter's '70s albums along with by Humphrey, Ronnie Foster, Marlena Shaw, Ronnie Laws and others would be viewed by the jazz public as embarrassing blemishes on Blue Note's fabled history. And while none of the Mizell Brothers-produced albums can compete, jazz wise, with any of Blue Note's previous catalog, today's DJs have revealed, those records are not as disposable as some would like you to believe.

During the hip-hop golden age of the late '80s and mid-'90s, when hip-hop acts such as A Tribe Called Quest, Digable Planets, Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth and Gangstarr were riding high, those Mizell Brothers-produced albums proved to be goldmines for crate-diggers looking for rare grooves and funky breakbeats to sample. Byrd was wholeheartedly embraced by the hip-hop jazz posse of that era, as well, appearing on such definitive hip-hop classics as Guru's 1993 *Jazzmatazz* and the 1994 compilation *Stolen Moments: Red, Hot + Cool*.

Now, it seems that those very same Mizell Brothers-produced Blue Note albums as well as other LPs in the same vein have become big influences on DJ culture. Various hip-hop and electronica producers are not just sampling those dusty grooves from the '70s but are actually absorbing the sonic designs and textures developed by the Mizell Brothers, searching out the exact analog keyboards they used on those records and ingeniously incorporating them into their own music.

You only have to look at a slew of recent releases to witness the Mizell Brothers influence. Byrd's "Think Twice" (from *Stepping in Tomorrow*) was covered by neosoulsister Erykah Badu, on *Worldwide Underground*, and DJ Jay Dee on *Welcome 2 Detroit* (BBE), and it was treated to a sizzling deep-house and jazz makeover on the collective project *The Detroit Experiment* (Ropedope). In terms of arrangements and instrumentation, you can detect the Mizell Brothers' signature sound in practically ever other R&B and hip-hop disc coming out of the Soulquarians collective—which includes Badu, D'Angelo, ?uestlove, Bilal, producers James Poyser and Jay Dee and more, and who directly influenced Roy Hargrove's recent *Hard Groove* (Verve)—as well as the electronica-spurred R&B revival in Detroit, the grungy hip-hop from the Stones Throw label and the avant-garde-ish broken-beat scene out of West London, Berlin and Philly.

On Madlib's *Shades of Blue* project, in which he reimagined a batch of Blue Note compositions via bizarre remixes and reinterpretations, his blunted-out beats and oblique keyboard figures transformed the disc into somewhat of a love letter to the Mizell Brothers. And under the guise of Yesterday's New Quintet, Madlib released *Angles With Edges*, in which he delivered bewildering, if wicked, interpretations of Humphrey's "Una Esta" and "Mestizo Eyes."

"I love the Mizell Brothers' production, even their singing," Madlib says. "I love their rugged beats and keyboards."

House and hip-hop producer DJ Spinna agrees with Madlib about the Mizells. "I think of big cities when I hear their music. From them, I get a strong sense of an urban vibe like a soundtrack to the streets," he says. On Spinna's *Here to There* tunes "Alfonso's Thang," "Galactic Soul" and "Rock Unplugged," featuring the jazz-funk trio Soulive, you can imagine the Mizell Brothers in the control booth or laying the spacey keyboard fills and percolating rhythmic beds themselves. "Their sound made me go out and get a Clavinet and an ARP String Ensemble, which they used a lot. Really, if it weren't for those records, we wouldn't have hip-hop. DJs like me and Madlib were looking for those records to sample years ago. After a while, we matured and went on to appreciate the musicianship behind those records."

"When I first started buying jazz records, the Mizell Brothers were the first people that I got into," says DJ Charlie Dark, a London-based producer and mastermind of the Blacktronica movement, which concentrates on unveiling the black-music roots of techno and electronica, such as reggae, jazz-fusion, funk and R&B. "My initial reason for getting into the Mizell Brothers was because their music was inexpensive to buy at the time. People weren't really thinking about Bobbi Humphrey then. Donald Byrd's '70s stuff was something that people laughed at if they saw it in your collection. [Those records] sounded old but futuristic at the same time, and they were very warm and mixed very well."

Adds fellow Londoner DJ and techno maverick Kirk Degiorgio: "I got a lot of inspiration from the Mizell Brothers like layering my melodies by thickening up the synthesizers, ARP Strings and Mini-

Moog." Degiorgio has dedicated an entire section on his Web site (kirkdegiorgio.com) to the Mizell Brothers. "They always seemed to have an uplifting vibe to the records, even when they were doing some darker things like "Back to the Projects" on John Hammond's *Gambler's Life* album. The subject matter is pretty dark—gambling and ghetto life—but the music is so uplifting."

When Donald Byrd first linked up with the Mizell Brothers he had already attempted to follow Miles Davis' lead in the more open-ended, considerably more challenging world of edgy jazz-fusion, with *Electric Byrd* and *Ethiopian Knights*. In the late '60s, Byrd also started teaching at Howard University, where one of his aspiring students was Fonce Mizell, who left school in 1969 for the West Coast. "Byrd and I stayed in touch, though," Fonce Mizell says. "Larry had some tunes that I thought would be good for him to listen to."

Apparently, Byrd dug what he heard and they initially cut two tunes. "Five or four months past, then we got the word to produce the whole album, which became *Black Byrd*."

Larry Mizell says, "The reason it took so long was that there were a lot of different opinions on whether or not Byrd should stay straightahead or go with the things that we had cut. The day he cut those two tunes, he also cut a bunch of straightahead jazz."

A few years prior to the brothers' collaborations with Byrd, Fonce was already mapping out a promising career as an R&B songwriter, arranger and producer. He joined with keyboardist and former college roommate Freddie Perren, guitarist Deke Richards and Motown's Berry Gordy as the Corporation, and together they produced some of the Jackson Five's most enduring classics such as "ABC" and "I Want You Back."

Once Larry joined forces with Fonce, they worked with other Motown acts such as Marvin Gaye, the Miracles, Martha and the Vandellas and, later, even arranged and the produced the classic 1974 blaxploitation soundtrack *Hell Up in Harlem* with Edwin Starr.

Although the Mizells were thoroughly schooled in the hard bop and soul-jazz of the '60s, they admittedly were coming from an unapologetically R&B and funk angle when working with Byrd. They never made claims that what they were producing was jazz. "We basically had no game-plan to change Byrd's sound," insists Larry Mizell. "We were basically working with instrumental funk; doing our thing. We didn't use any 'jazz players' for our rhythm players. Instead, we used cats who played on pop and R&B sessions in Hollywood. In fact, we didn't even call it jazz—jazz magazines did."

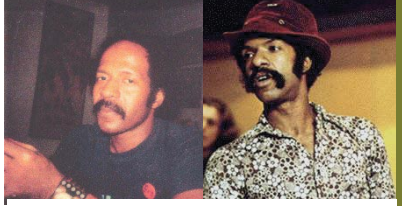
Whether they called it jazz-funk or instrumental funk, the instantly recognizable Mizell Brothers sound began attracting other jazz artists outside of the Blue Note roster such as Byrd's protégés the Blackbyrds; organist Johnny Hammond, with whom the Mizells etched out the dance-floor classic "Los Conquistadors Chocolates" from *Gears*; flutist Roger Glenn on *Reachin'*; and alto saxophonist Gary Bartz with *Music Is My Sanctuary* and *Shadow Do*. The Mizells also kept their feet firmly planted in the R&B realm, producing hits under the Sky High Productions banner for LTD and Rance Allen, then landing their biggest commercial success in 1978 with A Taste of Honey's disco anthem "Boogie Oogie Oogie."

Strangely, right after they peaked with A Taste of Honey's 1979's *Another Taste*, the Mizell Brothers seemed to have vanished.

According to Larry Mizell, they had a record deal with Elektra in the early '80s that went sour due to creative differences, so the brothers ended up retreating to Europe. Since then, they've been mysteriously MIA. Larry insists, however, that the Mizell Brothers are trying to make a comeback, starting their own label and modernizing their signature Sky High sound.

"They would kill on an album right now," DJ Spinna claims. "Only thing they would have to do is stick to their formula."

The Mizells might have had a stronghold on the jazz-funk of the '70s, but they certainly didn't have a monopoly. Artists such as the Crusaders, Weldon Irvine, Ramsey Lewis, Patrice Rushen, Grover Washington Jr., the Brecker Brothers and Catalyst made indelible marks on the scene as well as did many of the albums produced on CTI, Fantasy, Flying Dutchman and Cadet. Certainly, no discussion about jazz-funk and its influence on electronica would be complete without examining Herbie Hancock's groundbreaking success with the Headhunters band and its predecessor, the explorative Mwandishi ensemble.


Larry and Fonce Mizell

With the help of San Francisco-based producer Dave Rubinson, Hancock solidified his position as one of the foremost experimental jazzers—and one of the funkiest. Hancock's "Chameleon," from 1974's *Headhunters*, continues to be a jazz-funk standard, influencing future generation jazz, funk, hip-hop, R&B and electronica cats.

Rubinson says the recording for the original "Chameleon" is a 23-minute marathon. "And it still exists," he claims. "I'm trying to get someone from Sony to put it out, because Bennie Maupin had a lot of soloing in that. The song was called 'Chameleon' because it changed colors so many times, but most people remember just the A section; the whole middle section—that's the genius of the record. But we had to cut a lot of it out, because during those days, you could only put 41 minutes on an album. We had to cut Bennie's solo down to almost nothing."

Charlie Dark

"That's not surprising," says Degiorgio after learning of "Chameleon"'s original length. "In the middle of the ARP Strings Ensemble solo, it goes out of tune. But Herbie quickly retunes it—it's edited very quickly. I've always wondered if they just cut it short or if the tuning was going completely out of whack or whether they left it in there deliberately."

With *Headhunters* and "Chameleon," Rubinson helped Hancock obtain that monster hit that eluded him with his previous forays into avant-garde fusion. At the beginning of their partnership, Hancock was embarking on musical concept with Mwandishi that was far more otherworldly than the earthier Headhunters. Still, it's fascinating to note when Rubinson was brought by Warner Bros., Hancock's previous label before Columbia, he was to help produce a similar commercial follow-up to 1970's boogaloo-driven *Fat Albert Rotunda*.

Before the formation of Mwandishi, Hancock had converted to Buddhism and wanted to express his newfound, searching spirituality through the music, which translated into outer-spaceways flights, highlighted with liquid Fender Rhodes washes, creepy sound effects, and elliptical improvisations. It was certainly more of a creative breakthrough for Hancock than commercial but as Rubinson notes; *Mwandishi* also signaled the beginning of Hancock taking charge of the sonic nuances of his albums—postproduction wise.

"Herbie didn't know what postproduction was," Rubinson says. "That was something that he never done before, because he had been working so long with the Blue Note school. We mixed a lot of stuff together, using rock 'n' roll techniques. Herbie was really up to his eyebrows in the postproduction for the first time. As a result, his eyes were opened to the new sonic possibilities."

Before collaborating with Hancock, Rubinson had worked with Santana, Cold Blood, the Chamber Brothers and Elvin Bishop. Through those rock connections, he was able to enlist Santana percussionist Jose "Cepito" Areas and guitarist Ronnie Montrose for Hancock's *Mwandishi* session. Rubinson helped further expand Hancock's soundscapes by bringing on synthesizer player Patrick Gleeson for 1971's *The Crossing*.

Gleeson was a literature professor at Berkeley with a duel career as a synthesizer musician. "I told Herbie to check out what Patrick was doing," Rubinson says. "And when Herbie saw what synthesizers could do, for the first time, he could hear something in his head and make it happen."

Hancock, Rubinson and Gleeson were pushing farther into the fusion avant-garde, and Warner Bros. went ahead and dropped Hancock from their roster. "Warner Bros. dropped Herbie Hancock, Labelle and Earth, Wind & Fire all on the same day," Rubinson says. "Those very, very important artists of the future of black music dropped. I was there. They said, 'We don't know what to do with this music.' They all went to Columbia Records."

With Rubinson and Gleeson, Hancock continued exploring the outer limits with his Columbia debut, *Sextant*, which is still one of his most adventurous, electronica-pre-

Kirk Degiorio

saging albums to date. Elegantly balancing galactic electronic soundscapes with earthy percussion, Hancock had constructed a masterful primer that would inform the Afro-futuristic ideology of Dark's Blacktronica.

"What I like about Herbie's records is they were never afraid to experiment," Dark says. "They are grounded in the principles of music but always took on whatever was happening at the time. And that's something that we try to do with Blacktronica; make the connection between the present and what came before it. With Blacktronica, we say from Carl Craig to John Coltrane and everything in between—bringing all forms of black music from Lee 'Scratch' Perry and King Tubby to Herbie Hancock and the Mizell Brothers under one roof and hear them played alongside each other."

For further proof of Hancock and Rubinson's influence on today's electronica artists, see Ubiquity's recently released, third edition of its *Rewind* series—in which cutting-edge artists of that label perform loving remakes of seminal '70s funk, jazz, rock and R&B songs—Detroit-based keyboardist, singer and producer Jeremy Ellis does an almost note-for-note, nuance-for-nuance cover of "Chameleon." The track was originally intended for one of his solo projects, Ayro.

"I like to do real work-study type of projects [with remakes]," Ellis says. "What I like to do is totally learn all the melodies of the song, the solos, the bass lines and those kinds of things. I decided that I wanted to completely cover "Chameleon" note for note, especially considering that it's a superclassic. Every thing on that song kills—the keyboards, the drums are wicked, the sax is super fresh. I can easily say that the entire *Headhunters* album and *Thrust* are some of the most influential albums in my life."

Detroit-based guitarist, DJ and producer John Arnold bigups "*Thrust* as well as one of his favorite Herbie Hancock records. "I think it often plays second fiddle to *Headhunters*," he says. For his splendid new CD *Neighborhood Science*, Arnold, with the help of Ellis, covered Hancock's 1983 beatbox jam "Rough" from the groundbreaking *Future Shock*. "The sounds that Herbie used on those ['70s and early '80s] albums are still as fresh today as they were back then. In terms of the vibes, his funk on *Thrust* was almost on another level. I think a lot of that had to do with Mike Clark as well. I wish that I could play like Mike Clark on the MPC [Akai's series of sampler-sequencers]. I really love the way the drums sounded. It's something about those drums that I do hear that often. Sometimes, I would just sample the snare from *Thrust* or the bass drum, just to have that drum-set sound."

In addition to Rubinson's decade-long run with Hancock in the '70s, he produced other noteworthy jazz-funk albums for Tower of Power, Labelle, the Pointer Sisters and numerous others. Say Degiorgio: "On my recent *Soul of Science* project, I included a Pointer Sisters track with the Headhunters on it, called 'Chainey Do.' It has this incredible percussion break. I really like the way Dave Rubinson was obviously very open-minded with Herbie—and Herbie, himself, bringing worlds of percussion into this kind of Sly Stone funk."

In 1982, Rubinson's producing career abruptly ended due to a heart attack. He closed his famous San Francisco-based studio, the Automat, and three years later he relocated to New York City. By 1988 he started managing electronica pioneer Ryuichi Sakamoto. Lately, Rubinson has been producing documentary films.

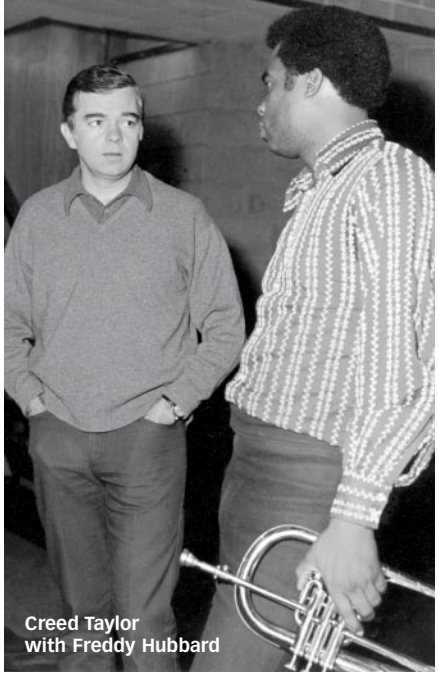
It's comparatively easy to detect the influential sounds of the Mizell Brothers and Rubinson on hip-hop and electronica, especially in terms of their groundbreaking usage of keyboards, synthesizers and grooves. Less obvious is the impact of Creed Taylor's legendary CTI records. Seminal hip-hop artists such as the Beastie Boys, Dr. Dre, Eric B. & Rakim, Pete Rock and Jazzy Jeff continuously mine CTI (and its funkier sister label, Kudu) in search of cranking break-beats then tweaking them into some of hip-hop's most enduring anthems.

"Hip-hop producers got those CTI records simply for the drum breaks, but later on they discovered that the music on those records was really good," Spinna says. "After a while, when we matured, we went on to appreciate the musicianship behind those records and continue to collect those records. We might find one big record that has a groove, and then discover the 'undiscovered' CTI records that came out two or three years later."

"I've lost count the amount of break-beats that hip-hop has used from the CTI catalog," Degiorgio laughs. "I didn't realize, until recently that Creed Taylor had this specific sound in mind with CTI. I read in an old *Down Beat* that he and Rudy Van Gelder planned that whole sound really meticulously. It wasn't just an accident that those records just came out sounding so overly compressed. They really went for a totally different sound that hadn't been heard in jazz before. That really pleases me to see the level that the producer went to get a particular sound."

"There was no secret," Creed Taylor responds when asked about CTI's sonic aesthetic. "There were just the artists—whether it's Freddie Hubbard, Gil Evans or Ray Charles—and then there was the arranger. Then, there was Rudy Van Gelder and me. When we did have a full arrangement for an orchestral group or even a smaller group, I would have a score in the control booth and I would sit right next to

Herbie Hancock, Bill Graham and Dave Rubinson



Creed Taylor with Freddy Hubbard

Rudy—but I never told him what to do."

Despite Taylor's modesty, nearly everything about CTI—from the lustrous fidelity and elegant artwork to the rich orchestrations, deep grooves and heavy melodic emphasis—seemed thoroughly manicured, catering specifically to populist tastes. For those who wanted some form of musical sophistication but nothing too out there, CTI was for them.

Before Taylor launched CTI in 1967, first as an imprint with A&M Records, he had already gained noteworthy praise for conceiving Impulse and for his impeccable productions for Verve, Bethlehem and ABC Paramount. Through most of these pre-CTI sessions, Taylor exhibited a fondness for large orchestral arrangements and pop ingenuity. His first CTI records, under A&M, captured the bossa nova zeitgeist with Antonio Carlos Jobim's *Stone Flower*, Tamba 4's *We and the Sea* and Milton Nascimento's *Courage* as well as some of the more breezy-jazz leanings of Wes Montgomery and George Benson. During this time, CTI also released Quincy Jones' prophetic *Walking in Space*, which announced the arrival of keyboardist and arranger Bob James to the CTI stable and pointed to some of the funkier directions Taylor would take once he went independent with the label in 1970.

With a heavyweight roster of house artists as Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter, Stanley Turrentine, Grady Tate, Hank Crawford, Kenny Burrell and Hubert Laws, Taylor ingeniously balanced their hard-bop roots with backbeat grooves, R&B riffs and melodies from session guys such as Richard Tee, Eric Gale, Hugh McCracken and Ralph MacDonald. CTI succeeded in creating music that sounded both upscale and street.

When the music Taylor was recording turned to overt funk, he issued the records on Kudu. That label didn't have as much of the fancy artwork and gatefold-sleeve stylings of CTI, but the Kudu LPs most definitely had that Taylor–Van Gelder magic. "Generally, on those Kudu records, the drummer was Idris Muhammad and the bassist was Gary King," Taylor says. "One of the arrangers for Kudu besides Bob James was David Mathews. The reason I brought David in was because he was the architect of the James Brown band, and he was a Gil Evans fan. He had one leg in jazz and the other in a steady job with James Brown."

Even though CTI and Kudu primarily championed pop and R&B tunes of the day and MOR-variations of European classical themes over original music, some new and now-classic compositions did emerge from those albums: Grove Washington Jr.'s

"Mister Magic," James' "Nautilus" (both classic samples for hip-hoppers), Hubbard's "Red Clay," and Turrentine's "Sugar."

Taylor makes no bones about the fact he was doing upscale-sounding populist music. He doesn't like the word "fusion."

"I think fusion is one of those catchall terms that people in the record industry view as 'I think modern and avant-garde jazz with a touch of pop material thrown in.' I really don't like the term very much. It's kind of nondescript," he quips. "The term 'jazz' is a much misused term by the industry. Deodato's *Prelude*, with the 'Theme From 2001,' was originally released as a jazz record and people took it as a jazz record. Then, six months later it was no longer a jazz record—it was pop record [because it sold well]. The same thing happened to Stanley Turrentine's *Sugar*: When it went and sold 100,000 LPs units at that time, it was no longer considered a jazz record but a pop record."

While CTI boasted an esteemed roster of established jazz artists, its releases were hands-down some of the funkier jazz-marketed records of the '70s. CTI and Kudu even managed to release a handful of 12-inch and 45 r.p.m. singles aimed directly at the dance clubs and jukeboxes.

"I listened to the Temptations and those Philadelphia International Records. I'm sure I subconsciously or consciously borrowed some ideas," Taylor says. "I would take a record like The Temptations' 'People in Glass Houses' and discuss it with Rudy. We'll have Bob James come into a session, and I'll say, 'I'll like to try this.' Those Temptations and Philly records were very creative. I liked them because they copied stuff that I was doing. It was kind of a filter, back and forth with the producers like Gamble and Huff and Norman Whitfield."

London house producer Phil Asher definitely studied the CTI sound when producing New Zealand-born, London-based saxophonist Nathan Haines' 2001's *Sound Travels* and 2003's *Squire for Hire*. Both discs balance Haines' considerable improvisational and melodic command on flute, tenor and soprano saxophones with the latest rhythmic innovations of deep house and broken beat. "I really didn't come into contact with CTI until I started hanging out with Phil," says Haines, who studied privately with George Coleman and Joe Lovano before delving into the dance music scene. "I started noticing that all the CTI records had the same players: Grady Tate, Ron Carter, Cedar Walton—people like that. Then, I said, 'Ahhh, so this is what those guys were doing in the '70s.' When you're young sometimes you do know how everything fits together. That sort helped me getting over the jazz police and really looking at the careers of these musicians."

CTI faded into obscurity toward the end of the '70s due to financial problems; it was revived briefly in the mid-'90s only to succumb to those same issues. A handful of classic CTI/Kudu records were reissued through Columbia/Legacy two years ago, and many others have been reissued in the U.K. As for another comeback, Taylor says that he's working on a new distribution deal for a revamping of the CTI label.

With so much influence on hip-hop, it's baffling to hear Taylor say he has little interest in a remix project of CTI's catalog, like what Blue Note and Verve have done with theirs. "If I saw any reason to remix something that has already been done that didn't sound that good, I would go out and have Rudy do it," Taylor explains. "I respect what we have done and regard the originals as hallowed ground. If there's some technical reason to remix as a result to some technological advances that would make the music clearer, I would do it."

The jazz-funk catalog of Atlantic, particularly those LPs produced by Joel Dorn, have influenced hip-hoppers much the same way as CTI albums have—for their break-beats and warm but rough sound.

The shrewd and amiable Dorn theorizes that Atlantic's jazz catalog often gets overlooked due to his departure in the mid-'70s. "The jazz catalog has never had the respect at Atlantic that a Blue Note catalog had," he says. "When I left and Nesuhi Ertegun went to Europe, there was never an Atlantic jazz catalog that matched up with what he had done or what I had done after him. It just wasn't a priority. So, it was kind of in a no-man's land at Atlantic, where there was nobody there who cared about it. Every once in awhile, you'd get a Jean-Luc Ponty or Billy Cobham, but only for a minute."

Nevertheless, Dorn fully understands the influential he and other jazz-funk producers have on today's hip-hop and R&B and embraces the idea of jazz remixing. "Some people are violently against jazz remixes, but I'm not," Dorn says. In fact, Dorn's son, Adam, does jazz-influenced electronica under the name Mocean Worker. "I think once something is out there, it's up for grabs. But then, if you do something, you better do something that works. Because, there wouldn't be no bigger crime in the world than taking a classic, hall of fame record and doing a half-assed job with it."

Having worked as a disc-jockey at Philadelphia's WHAT-FM, Dorn remembers vividly when jazz and R&B were much more cozy, which allowed for bona-fide jazz singles such as Etta Jones' "Do Go to Strangers" and Ahmad Jamal's "Poinciana" to race up the pop, R&B and jazz charts. "I learned so much from that job," Dorn says. "We had a telephone in the studio, so when we would play records, listeners could call in. You would know in 15 minutes if a record was going to sell or not by the phone response that we got."

With an uncanny ability to identify a hit and an insatiable love for jazz, Dorn successfully transferred his skills as a radio DJ to a producer for Atlantic. Before getting a full-time gig with Atlantic, the label initially just distributed Dorn-produced records through their 3000 or 6000 series with LPs by Sonny Still, Rufus Harley, Valerie Capers, Robin Kenyatta and Rahsaan Roland Kirk. From all the contacts he made as a disc jockey, Dorn knew all the up-and-coming artists and the veterans looking for a record deal. When his full-time tenure at Atlantic began in 1967, Dorn brought in his roster of artists and well as others he had been eying.

"I never considered myself a jazz producer," Dorn says. "I considered myself a producer, who did significantly more jazz than a lot of across-the-board producers. But when I made those records, I only looked for two things: world-class chops and originality. Once I was working with people like that, I didn't have to make records for them. I tried to capture what it was they did, and in some instances put it into a context that complemented them. I was always interested in artists like Rahsaan, Yusef Lateef, Hank Crawford, Dave Fathead Newman and Eddie Harris—and making crossover records that would get better sales without compromising whatever was unique about them."

With experimental reedmen such as Kirk, Lateef and Eddie Harris, Dorn often concocted otherworldly soundscapes in which ethereal jazz explorations cross-pollinated with gritty R&B grooves and pop


Joel Dorn

melodies. "It was joy to take Yusef and record him with a string quartet or with 15 to 20 reed overdubs or with the Sweet Inspirations," Dorn says. "At that time, I was heavy into Felini, so the surreal aspects of records, regardless of whether it was of a jazz artist or opera singer, appealed to me."

Dorn's unorthodox recordings and compositional emphasis on R&B, funk and pop, while popular among some fans, initially received harsh criticism from the crustier jazz folks. "I still get that shit," he laughs. "The backlash I got was, 'You're fucking everybody up.' I didn't do anything to Rahsaan. A freight train couldn't have done something to Rahsaan. He finally felt comfortable enough to go and do all the stuff that he did. I never suggested a song to him. With Yusef, I would come up with an idea and he'll come back with his version of the idea—so we worked on themes. With Les McCann, after we did that first record, *Much Les*, he felt comfortable in the studio and started experimenting. He did that record *Invitation to Openness*; it was a radical record for that time because of the layers. So, when people would hear that stuff, the first thing I would get in reviews would be, 'These people were great musicians until Dorn started messing with them and doing all this goofy shit and stuff like that.' It looked like that to them, but we were doing those things together."

Atlantic would often R&B sessions players such as Chuck Rainey, Cornell Dupree, Bernard Purdie and Richard Tee with jazz musicians, giving birth to their formidable soul-jazz catalog with albums such as Herbie Mann's *Memphis Underground*, Lateef's *Detroit* and Kirk's *Blacknuss*, among others. (Dorn also did the reverse and teamed up jazz men such as Ron Carter, Bucky Pizzarelli and Frank Wess with R&B-jazz vocalist Roberta Flack for her 1969 debut, *First Take*.)

Perhaps the most influential Atlantic recording of this era is Eugene McDaniel's 1971 political manifesto *Headless Heroes of the Apocalypse*, which has been sampled by numerous acts, most notably the Beastie Boys and A Tribe Called Quest.

"One of the key things that I think made hip-hop cats interested in '70s jazz-funk was the introduction of the R&B rhythm section into the jazz musician's world," Dorn says. "I remember initially it was hard to convince jazz guys to use nonjazz rhythm sections. A lot of what is called jazz-funk came out of the fact that we were able to introduce new rhythm players, so that a David 'Fathead' Newman or a Yusef or a Herbie Mann would be playing with guys who played a different kind of music. And it worked at its best when there was a real meeting between the jazz and R&B players."

That's still true today in the hip-hop and electronica worlds. ***JT***

DUMP

DUMP